

Matthew 26: 30-35

"From Triumph to Disaster"

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Today is a day of celebration! We are here to remember and to celebrate Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of the Jewish Passover feast.

I don't know where your imagination takes you on Palm Sunday. Mine has always taken me into the busy streets of Jerusalem with thousands of people cheering and shouting "Hosanna; Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" I imagine that people were filled with joy, and hope, and excitement because maybe, finally, Jesus is the promised Messiah who will topple the Roman occupiers.

I have always had a hard time getting into this celebratory mood because I know, we know, the story and how it ends. We know what is happening in this week we call Holy. We move from cheering to booing. We share a loving last super with Jesus, and then we sneak out after dinner and betray him. Jesus begs us to stay with him, we promise that we will, and then we don't. We abandon him, he's arrested and beaten; he forgives us, and then we run for the hills. Jesus is killed; we lay him in the tomb and weep; we go back for him, then he's gone, then he is back, and then – wait – he's not dead at all.

This is for sure a Holy Time. It lays the foundation for our faith. It speaks of the cost of our faith. It lays out the risks of being a faithful follower of Christ. It offers us choices about how close or not we want to get to Jesus, and God, and the whole thing we call the church or faith or religion.

I found out something this week that actually surprised me; something I did not know (well, there are a lot of things I don't know!). But I thought that is somewhat important for all of us to know. I don't know why but I imagined Jesus' entry into Jerusalem being the main event, the procession in town you did not want to miss. But it was not. Scholars believe that the Romans put on a military parade to make sure that the people who had come into town knew who was in charge. The Romans knew how to put on a show with stallions, polish gear, and attitude.

Jesus entered the city from the opposite side, riding on a donkey in dusty clothes. It was the counter-parade, making a mockery of Pilate and Rome. It might have started out small, but along the way he picked up the crowds that eventually shouted, 'Hosanna!' The crowds understood what was going on, and so did the ones in power. It was this procession scholars say, that they arrested him for because the mockery was intolerable. (Borg and Crossan, The Last Week)

When Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, he was unstoppable and he did what he always did: went to temple to teach. Even though his enemies tried to trick him several times, they were not successful.

No one even seriously complained when he overturned the table of the moneychangers and let the sacrificial birds loose. He kept stressing the new commandment, "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." He gave them a new ceremony with bread and wine which would later become the sacrament for billions of followers.

But then, by Thursday, triumph turns to disaster. On Thursday he was betrayed by one of his own, Judas. Then Peter, his rock, denies him not just one but three times. And eventually all of the disciples will abandon him and watch what happens from a safer distance. On Thursday night he is arrested and on Friday he dies a common criminal's death on a cross.

From triumph to disaster; first the palms of victory, then the passion. The grim truth is that the same people who shouted “Hosanna” on Sunday, shouted “Crucify him,” just five days later. Maybe we should not expect that much from the crowd. But I believe we should have expected more from the ones he had shared his life with for three years, his disciples, his friends. They turned their backs on him as well, only worse. They betrayed, denied, and deserted him. That must have been devastating.

What are we to make of all of this? What lessons can we take away from these events for our faith journey?

We can look at the story from the experience of the people around Jesus and from what they say and do come up with a message like this:

"Don't be like those who cheered one day and jeered the next. Be faithful and see yourself as Jesus' loyal follower every day, every moment, of your life."

That is a good message – one of the underlying one of our faith. Let's not fold when the going gets tough. Let's try to be strong and faithful. Let's be smart, and let us always follow the will of God.

Or maybe we can gain insight on our faith journey by stepping for a moment into Jesus' sandals, imagining what his experience was in the midst of this whirlpool of events. Did he really have to go this route? Couldn't he have stayed in Galilee and retired an old rabbi full of wisdom and compassion?

The answer is no because Jesus chose his path. He chose to leave the safety of his rural ministry and chose to confront the powers of both politics and religion in their very center; in Jerusalem.

Jesus did not choose this path to win a popularity contest. He saw the purpose of his life in terms of proclaiming a new relationship with God, a relationship of intimate familial love.

Jesus came to Jerusalem neither excited nor deceived by the applause of the crowds, nor downcast by the treachery, the desertion, the seemingly complete reversal of fortune he would endure.

Jesus knew what would happen to him - he even knew, as we heard today in the gospel reading that everyone around him would deny and desert him.

In both popular acclaim - and in denial and rejection - Jesus made it plain to everyone that he was not ruled by the feelings or events of the minute, but rather was walking step by step along a path which would lead him to the only source of true and lasting meaning for him and ultimately for us, that he was moving towards the fulfillment of God's will, for him and through him for the world.

It didn't matter if the path seemed to reach a peak from which there was no way to go but down. Jesus knew that his goal was not the top of the mountain, not popularity or power or applause.

Equally it did not matter that the path seemed to lead into, and end, in the valley of the shadow of death. Regardless of appearances, regardless of the popularity that Jesus found, and regardless of the suffering that he knew he would undergo, Jesus chose to be true to his mission, he chose to be obedient; knowing, hoping, praying that, regardless of what might happen, he would be supported, surrounded, and encompassed by the presence, the mercy, and the love of God.

It is a lesson for all of us to remember.

If we depend upon the events of life to give us reward and satisfaction then we may never achieve them or we may have them snatched away in the very moment of tasting victory.

We may be at the peak of our lives, with money, health, security, friends, but - in those terms - there is nowhere to go but downhill in the weeks, months, and years ahead.

On the other hand, we - like Christ - have the opportunity to always walk our own unique path toward God.

It is a path which may see us surrounded by enjoyment, possessions, and popularity, or it may lead us into loneliness, misunderstanding, and poverty.

But none of these things will, in the end, give life its meaning.

People might argue that the journey is the most important. But when it comes to faith it is the destination which counts and no one's life can be more well spent than in seeking to find and do God's will.

The journey from Palm Sunday to Good Friday wasn't just a journey from triumph to disaster, from good news to bad news. It did not end there. There was the final good news which redeemed it all and which reminds us that God can take any situation - no matter how bad it seems, and make it into good news for all of us.

Practically everyone has known the taste of Palm Sunday, the sweetness of success and popularity, and nearly all of us have tasted the bitterness of Good Friday, of failure and rejection.

What saves us from an endless round of ups and downs, what frees us from the tyranny of events over which we have no control is our commitment to press forward in faithfulness to

God. It is trust in God's love to bring about Easter morning - knowing that the meaning of life is to be found in the knowledge and love of God - and in sharing that knowledge and love with those who accompany us on the way.

Amen