

Parade

“All eyes are on him. All eyes are on you.”

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Mark 11:1-11

Sixth in the Lenten series, “Open Hearts”

Rev. John H. Hice

April 5, 2009

First United Methodist Church of Royal Oak, Michigan

At the Parade

Why are we doing this? Why do the children march around the sanctuary waving palm branches? We do this every year.

I recall the scene in the church I belonged to growing up. It was the same scene. And just like it was yesterday, I remember standing in the mass choir holding a palm branch and singing what I think was our traditional anthem. It was a song so grand it seemed we had to sing it every year. Mr. Hollowell, my dad’s friend and the tenor who usually got the higher men’s solo parts in church would start it out: “Behold the King draws through the city gates. Break forth Jerusalem, with shout and song!” He was followed by the adult choir “And moved as by one thought the people rise...” Then the children would sing our turn, I’d keep my eyes on Mrs. Greer, directing, as she raised her hands and bring us in “From out their peaceful village throughout their sunlit way. The Prince of Peace leads onward, a pilgrim band this day.”

All so grand, like we were heralding the very glory of God into the midst of us by this parade reenacted year after year. And here we are, at it again today.

But why? Is there something in us that needs Jesus to ride on a donkey into Jerusalem, palms waiving and cloaks placed on the road before him?

Is there some reason that all eyes need to be on him today?

Day of the Palms

That’s what happens, you know, when you march in a parade. All eyes are on you. Perhaps it’s not like marching in a band. I’ve done that. I’ve had to take my trombone in hand and march, front row-right corner in my scratchy wool uniform on hot Memorial Day parades. And I can tell you, whether we were playing or only moving along in-step, it never felt like all eyes were on me. All eyes were on us, perhaps...or on the interesting float with the beauty queen moving behind us.

It's maybe more like the times I ran in the 15K runs that were held during Cherry Festival in Traverse City. We'd get up awful-early and set out in the morning dew on this run that covered over 9 miles along the both East and West Bays, over the big hill in the middle of Old Mission Peninsula, then back into the city, downtown. By that time people would all have gathered along the curb on both sides of the streets. Some were on lawn chairs attached with chains to the street signs, others were sitting on blankets placed on the curbs and others, still were standing, maybe 4 or five rows deep behind them. The temperature would have risen and we'd all feel over-heated; and each runner had found his or her own space in the race. And all the spectators who came to see the parade were there watching us – all half-million of them watching each one of us as we ran down the center of Front Street somehow inspired by the spectacle of the crowd watching the spectacle of us. What a rush!

When Jesus rode in parade through the city gates it was more like that. All eyes were on him for whatever good that was with their "Hallelujahs" and "Blessed is he's."

And also, that's what it was like for all the peril into which he marched.

Why do you suppose he did it? Why do you suppose he decided that day to have his disciples fetch the donkey's colt (perhaps pre-arranged since he started out in territory thick with friends)?

Others were known for their triumphal entries. Roman emperors rode that way into Rome. Conquerors from Chaldea, and Hellenist Syria, and Rome had marched triumphantly through the gates and into the temple to destroy it or desecrate it.

Why would Jesus? Some point to passages like Psalm 118, those that seem to foretell of this happening. They say: "See? It was a fulfillment of prophecy." Then others say, "Wouldn't Jesus have known about those scriptures and just done it to be convincing?"

I would say Jesus did know them and expected others to be aware of them too. And he did it as one who was making a certain statement; a statement that was central to his mission.

In a way, Jesus had been leading a parade from the time he emerged from the wilderness, hungry and focused to serve. It was a matter of accomplishing the most

important work for him to do: begin a parade into our hearts to the heart of a world that had already seen too much destruction and too little of God.

It was a parade he led, when he said “You’re blessed, now: if you’re poor or grieving, tired or hurting or longing for peace,”² when he said, “Come to me, you who are tired and heavy-laden and I will give you rest.” It was a parade he led when he said that there is a different way to victory and peace in this world than becoming more powerful and oppressive than the rest. It was a parade he led when he laid his hand on the sick and broken and made them well, looked at a sinner and said, “You are forgiven,” broke bread with the outcast and told them, after all this time, they belonged.

He was leading a parade throughout his life. It seemed like there was this gap between people and God and the gap was caused by everything that keeps people separated from love and life. Then Jesus spent his life marching into the gap; in parade; and leading the parade he was bound to lead us all back into the arms of God.

So if you ask me why Jesus rode the donkey’s colt to the city gates with the leafy branches waiving and the cloaks thrown down before him, I’d say that he was stepping into the gap for us. Once and for all, so there’d be no mistake, he was bent on leading our parade back to God.

All eyes were on him. Especially the eyes of those who were bent on his destruction: so you know what this would mean for him. It meant that from now on, he could never turn back. He paraded out there for the sake of a world that could be; he marched out into the open without a chance to turn back for you and me.

He was in the gap, leading the parade if it was the last thing he would ever do.

And it was just about the second-to-the-last.

March

That’s why Jesus marched. And if you are inclined to call him, “King of kings;” or join in crying out the “Hallelujah’s” and “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,” perhaps it’s because there is something in you that wants him to be, in every sense of the word, *Savior*.

.Because there’s one more thing that needs to be said about a parade.

It has to do with your view. Have you ever noticed the way people are when the crowd is thick along the way? Some are content to sit in the gutter, right along the street so they don't miss a thing. Others have taken the very best places, maybe getting there long before the beginning of the parade to get the choice spot. Others crowd in and strain over the shoulders of those in front while shorter people like Zacchaeus the tax collector go climb a tree or hang out of a window from a nearby building.

None of them, I think, get the *best* view. Certainly, none of these would be the best view in the parade of Jesus and the palms. No. The best view you get of Jesus is the one you have when you follow.

May you join Jesus when he marches into your gap. May you meet him there and join his parade to the arms of God.