

Have you ever been swept into the midst of a celebration? I remember traveling with my foreign exchange parents in England when a young man was being welcomed home from military service. The little hamlet was decorated with colorful streamers, signs of welcome hung from every home, and the air thick with excitement. As the afternoon slowly ticked by in anticipation, people began to pour into the cobbled streets. And then the moment arrived when he stepped from the vehicle bringing him home. Shouts of exuberant welcome shot into the air, the sound of clapping hands echoed off the brick walled homes, bodies pressed together and hugged indiscriminately in sheer joy, for a beloved son was safely home. As strangers from lands thousands of miles away, we were swept into this parade of welcome. As I reflected on our Palm Sunday passage today, it seems highly probable that a number of people were swept into this parade as well.

But, let's back up and explore this parade's beginning. The Gospel of Mark spends quite a bit of time telling us about Jesus' ride! You see Jesus and the disciples were on the move, traveling from Jericho where Bartimaeus, a blind man, was healed, to Jerusalem. Yet, when they neared Bethphage and Bethany, about 2 miles southeast of Jerusalem, Jesus issued these instructions to two of his disciples: "Go into the village of Bethphage, and as soon as you enter, you'll find a colt tethered, one that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it. If anyone asks, 'What are you doing?' say, 'The Master needs him and will return him right away.'"

Well, the two disciples find everything just as Jesus said. But, we should ask why this detail was necessary. Couldn't Jesus have just picked out his own ride like a nice stallion or a beautiful mare? Why a colt of a donkey that had never been ridden?

Listen to Zechariah 9:9, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

"Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem" for a parade is in the making! The hope Zechariah offered to the people of Israel hundreds of years earlier is coming to fulfillment in Jesus. I hear echoes of the psalmist's words as Jesus sets the stage, "O give thanks to the Lord, for the Lord is good, for God's steadfast love endures forever."

And so, the parade begins with Jesus on a colt and all the hopes of the people of Israel mount as Jesus makes his way from Bethany into Jerusalem through the east gates. What may have started with a small crowd swells as Jesus makes the 2-mile journey from Bethany to Jerusalem. Having walked the last mile or so of this journey myself, I can only imagine the gathering crowd sweeping in bystanders because of the exuberance of the procession.

I imagine breathless whispers as well as shouts, "The time has finally come; don't you remember what Zechariah said?" Our long awaited hope has arrived on a colt and his name is Jesus! Imagine coats flying off backs and being strewn on the ground. Imagine branches being waved wildly throughout the crowd. Imagine the escalating noise as the chants of hosanna gain momentum. Jesus will save us! Jesus is the long awaited divine help. Yes, hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord for Jesus will overthrow the Roman principalities and restore the Davidic line of kings! Long live Jerusalem and God's people! Hosanna! Hosanna! King Jesus!

With my mind's eye, I can see this wildly exuberant procession winding through the narrow-cobbled streets of 1st century Jerusalem and ending at the temple. The east side of the city would have been caught up in the procession. Everyone would have been drawn in at

some point even if they had not planned join the procession. Questions would have been murmured throughout the crowd as well as spread throughout the city. What is all this noise about? Who is this man on a colt? What does this mean for our city? What does Rome think?

This exuberant noisy crowd-drawing parade ends in the temple. The text seems to tell us that Jesus didn't stay long in the temple for it was already late. I imagine the crowds lingered outside and inside of the temple for a while, but eventually dissipated because Jesus and the disciples simply returned to Bethany that night with little fanfare.

The streets of the little English hamlet only reverberated with celebration for about fifteen minutes after the young man's arrival. The celebration quickly moved inside, to the young man's home. The crowd sorted itself out with some of us going our own way, while others entered the young man's home. I imagine the same was true for the parade of faith from Bethany to Jerusalem when Jesus entered the temple. For we all know parades come to an end, even though their memories stay with us.

The parade of faith that featured Jesus was etched into memories as the crowd dissipated and went home. Yet, something happened to the hope that was birthed in the parade of faith, for we know that within a matter of days the rally cry of "hosanna" converted to "crucify him." The principalities and powers of the church and the state destroyed the expectation of hope that paraded through Jerusalem on a colt.

As you reflect on this parade of faith, I wonder what the principalities and powers of the church and the state are doing to your sense of hope today, to our sense of hope today? Do we look into our tomorrows as a church and see hope? Do we look into our tomorrows as a nation and see hope? Do we look into our tomorrows clinging to the hope of the one who rode into Jerusalem on a colt? I wonder how this parade of faith can speak to us today?

From my own reflections on these passages, I know it is easy to get swept up into the excitement of exuberant faith. Who doesn't like to participate in worship where songs of praise are lifted high? When God's people gather together and sound like the psalmist, "You are our God, and we will give thanks to you; you are our God, we will extol you. O give thanks to the Lord, for the Lord is God, for God's steadfast love endures forever." When God's people of faith are on fire and sure of the Lord; it is awesome to be together and to be swept into the parade. I have many such occurrences in my own journey of faith.

Yet, we all know that life is not always a parade. Parades end. The crowds go home. Life returns to the routine. Life fills with stress as responsibilities overwhelm. Life breaks open on account of pain and suffering. Life clings to life when desperation sets in. Life spills forth through tears of anguish. It is when life crashes in, that our parade of faith is tested.

We stand at the beginning of Holy Week, a week that is sandwiched by exuberant parades of "hosannas" and "hallelujahs". I believe if we were honest with ourselves, most of us would prefer to skip from parade to parade, from Palm Sunday to Easter without all the messiness in between; for it is far easier to be swept into these two parades than to live in between them. Yet, our parade of faith is just that, if it doesn't help us live between parades.

What happens between Palm Sunday and Easter tests the mettle of our faith. Can our faith cling to hope when hosannas turn to crucify him? Can our faith remain hopeful as it is nailed to a cross? Can our faith carry us through the valley of death?

You and I have a different vantage point than the disciples who accompanied Jesus. They denied. They scattered. They cowered in fear. They didn't understand what Jesus told

them, that he would defeat death. They didn't understand, but let's not give the disciples too much grief, because even today, even this side of the empty tomb, we deny the hope that rode into Jerusalem on what is now known as Palm Sunday.

We scatter when challenged by those who ridicule us for believing. We deny our faith when it is not convenient for us to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. We cower in fear when the powers and principalities that govern our lives threaten us. Even with the vantage point of the empty tomb, we at times find it hard to cling to the hope we have in Jesus Christ.

Like the parade of faith that took place so long ago, I believe you and I need to reclaim the rally cry of hosanna, for only Jesus can save us. Only divine intervention will see us through life. Our hope is in God alone. The question for us today is, "Do we believe this for our lives and for the life of this church?"

When the church finds it hard to connect with culture, will we despair? When governments are unjust, will we scatter and ignore the injustices? When church governance suggests that some are welcomed and others are not, will we give up hope? When a debilitating diagnosis is given, will we deny God's goodness? When financial hardships challenge this church, will we deny God's provision?

You see a parade of faith is just a parade if our faith doesn't help us when the crowds dissipate and the cheers turn to jeers. I pray that my faith and your faith and our collective faith is not just a parade that is all show and no substance. I pray that our faith is fueled by a deep well of hope that can see us through the week ahead between parades. Amen.