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**“Not for the Faint of heart”  
A sermon by Joseph S. Harvard**

**April 5, 2009**  
Mark 11:1-11

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Palm Sunday is an unusual day. It begins with a procession, shouting, waving palm branches. I love our tradition of going over to the Judicial Building meeting with our neighbors and blessing the Palms. It was in Jesus’ time and is for us a day when a sacred procession and a secular parade come together.

I love the story John Buchanan, pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in downtown Chicago, tells about the procession they have on Michigan Avenue. One year a seven year old boy named Jesse got in the spirit of the day. He loved the word “Hosanna” and kept repeating it. Later he was heard singing as loud as he could. “O Hosanna don’t you cry for me, I am going to Alabama with a banjo on my knee.”

The shift in emotions is dramatic is it not! The temptation is to focus on the festival and to ignore where this parade is headed. “Palm Sunday”, says Fleming Rutledge, an Episcopal priest, “has always been a crowd pleaser, the festivity of the procession, the stirring music, the repeated Hosannas and then we are plunged into the overwhelming drama of the passion...It’s not for the faint of heart.” (The Undoing of Death)

In an hour we go from shouting “Hosanna” to hearing the crowd shout “Crucify Him!” Where these the same people? Where they that fickle that in the short time of a week they had changed their tune? I am reminded of a poignant scene in the book, *The Reader* by Bernard Schlink. Kate Winslet won an Oscar for her role as Hannah Schmitt, the German woman who worked as a guard in Auschwitz when thousands died. When she was brought to trial and confronted by the judge about her part in the death camp,

she looked at the judge and asked, “I...I mean...so what would you have done?”

Everything in the courtroom was quiet for a moment. It was clear to everyone that her question begged for an answer – no, it demanded an answer.

So what would you have done? Before answering the question.

It is helpful to remember what happened on Palm Sunday and what it means.

The temptation has always been to focus on the positive and simply neglect the irony, the undercurrent of tragedy, and in the process to miss the meaning and the power altogether.

New Testament scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan begin their book, *The Last Week*, with the striking observation that on Palm Sunday there were actually two processions entering Jerusalem on that spring day. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year.

One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God, and his followers came from the peasant class. They had journeyed to Jerusalem from Galilee, about a hundred miles to the north.

On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, entered the city at the head of a column of Imperial Cavalry and soldiers. Jesus’ procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilates’ proclaimed the power of empire. The two processions embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus’ crucifixion.

It was standard practice for the Roman governor to move from his splendid palace in Caesarea, on the sea, to Jerusalem for all major Jewish festivals, bringing with him a military contingent. The Romans were the occupiers, and rulers. Just like Israel in the West Bank and our nation in Iraq, they had their hands full. Passover, after all, was a patriotic holiday when the Jews remembered and celebrated their liberation centuries earlier from slavery

and their journey toward nationhood, freedom, and a land of their own. That celebration was about them overcoming a hated occupation. So you can see why Pilate was concerned that maybe the enthusiasm at Passover would spill out into the streets and there would be some kind of violence.

Imagine that one procession of the Calvary with all the pomp and circumstance of a mighty empire, and the other a lowly rabbi carpenter riding humbly on a donkey.

The Roman government said that the emperor was divine, there was only one divinity and that was the government that ruled the people. Here was this small band of feisty people, with their peculiar insistence that there was one God, that Caesar was not their God. Things like that could topple the whole system, so Jesus told them to go and borrow a donkey. And then to quote the words of Zechariah:

“Lo, your king comes to you;  
humble and lowly,  
riding on donkey.”

It is a direct challenge to the powers and principalities of this world. In fact it was a counter procession was it not? A political demonstration.

It is important to note what did not happen on Palm Sunday. Fighting did not break out, there was not killing. Mark's enigmatic ending to the account of the day's activities is significant. Jesus walked into the temple, looked around, and left.

We are not sure what the behavior means. We do know that he did not go out and start a revolution, at least not the kind of revolution that his followers hoped he would start. But he did start a revolution. He started a revolution of love. His reign was not one of power and domination, but justice and kindness. His kingdom was, and is, not one of military might, but of compassion, of caring and striving for justice and peace.

Make no mistake about it, Jesus places himself and those who would follow him on Palm Sunday right in the center of life. No more can we say that religion and politics do not mix, not if you are a follower of Jesus, because there he is at the center of life conducting a counter procession against the Empire, whatever its name.

The Jewish theologian, the late Abraham Joshua Heschel once said that “religion begins in mysticism and ends in politics.”

Reinhold Niebuhr wrote, “When we talk about love, we have to become mature or we will become sentimental.” (*Justice and Mercy*, p. 35).

The Apostle Paul knew this. He talked about the love that motivates us and guides us. It was not some sentiment that you feel one moment and then another later on. He said, “love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, love never ends.” (I Corinthians 13:7-8)

Jesus Christ came into the world and he set this love loose. Those of us who follow him must follow that love to its logical conclusion. Whether it means working for equal rights for people who come to our shores from other countries, having a fair and just immigration policy. Whether it means caring for the sick, or working for justice for the poor, or speaking out against greed. We can not stand idly by if we claim to follow Christ when those less fortunate around us need our help, our voice, and our resources.

It is time for us to remember that the One who we follow takes us to the very heart of life.

In his new book, *What Jesus Meant*, Garry Wills calls Jesus coming into our lives, “God’s rescue mission into history.”

That is what we are about if we follow this Christ. This is the day he shows us that he comes to us, to our city, to our families, to our lives and to our hearts. He comes to proclaim the kingdom of God which is a kingdom of love and justice and compassion and he bids us to follow, to be grateful and courageous citizens of this new kingdom.

This is the first day of the week in which Christ shows us that he will die for us, die for us in a way that puts death behind us. His suffering is the source of our victory and therefore no suffering, no hell, no dying, that we can experience has he not already experienced.

Jesus rode into Jerusalem and he rides into our lives and it is God’s rescue mission into history. This may just be the most important day of the year. A day of two processions, a day when love confronts power, a day when love loves enough to become vulnerable, vulnerable even to the point of death. The first day of the week in which love will die and then destroy death. A

day on which Christ comes to you, to me, to our city and invites us to follow, to cast our lot with him and be citizens of his kingdom.

It is not a day for the faint of heart, but it is a day that takes us to the very heart of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.